

After the Storm

Hurricane Matthew, Haiti, and Disaster's Longue Durée

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“That night, the wind began to blow. All night, Claudine was calling me [from Port-au-Prince], telling us to get out of there, to be careful. When she hung up, she told me she’d call me at three in the morning. But by three o’clock, there was no communication. All the antennas had come down.” My friend Claudine’s father, St. Neret, described the night that Hurricane Matthew struck his home, in the seaside mountains of Haiti’s Grand’Anse department, on 4 October 2016. He, his wife Olène, their six-year-old daughter Ashkaïna, and Olène’s preteen daughters took shelter in their small wooden home.

The wind was blowing. I heard the grapefruit tree break in half, but no one could even stick their head out to see. By four in the morning, the house started to come apart. The sheet metal peeled away from the roof one by one. Olène started to cry. She was holding onto Ashkaïna, and the other girls were hiding under the table. I took Ashkaïna, I shielded her behind my back, and I stood in the corner, so that if a piece of wood or sheet metal came at us, it would hit me instead. I made her stand behind my back, and I stood in front of her. I told Olène, “Stop crying, you’re an adult, you have to stay strong for the children. You have to resign yourself. Everyone knows it’s either life or death. So resign yourself.”

After a few hours, they thought the worst was over. The wind had calmed, and St. Neret ventured out to check on his mule. But it was only the eye of the Category 4 storm passing over them. While he was outside, the wind picked up again, and he hurried back to his family. They cowered under the beds and tables as the house flew apart. “Even the dogs were under the table,” St. Neret recalled. “A piece of meat had fallen on the ground, and the dogs didn’t care. When I saw that, that’s when I knew we were going to die.” They fled, along with perhaps fifty neighbors, to caves in the nearby mountains.

“While we were sitting in the cave, me and Ashkaïna, she turned to me and said, ‘Papa, we’re going to escape. The time for us to die has passed.’”

“I said, ‘That’s right, my child. We’re going to escape. We’re not going to die. We’re not going to die yet.’”

“Then she asked, ‘Papa, can’t we go to Port-au-Prince?’”

“I said, ‘No, we can’t go to Port-au-Prince. All the roads are cut off and there’s no way through.’”

“She asked, ‘Can’t we walk?’”

“I said, ‘Do you think you can walk that far?’”

“And she said, ‘You can carry me on your back.’”

For a small child, the two hundred miles did not seem so insurmountable. They spent the next three days in the cave.

For days, I had watched as Matthew crept toward Haiti, a great white spiral on a satellite feed, as big as the Caribbean itself. It was heading straight for Haiti’s southern peninsula. I called Claudine, and she called everyone back home. “Tell everyone this isn’t like the other hurricanes they’ve lived through,” I’d told her. “This is going to be really, really bad.”

Our lives had become entwined because of another disaster, nearly seven years earlier: the earthquake of 12 January 2010. Claudine’s aunt Melise lived and worked in the house where I had rented a room. She was a household worker, a migrant from the Grand’Anse, who had come to Port-au-Prince in search of a better life for her family. Melise, her daughter, and Claudine lived together in a room off the downstairs kitchen. When the house collapsed in the quake, Melise was upstairs folding laundry. She was crushed to death in a house that was not her own, in a city that was not her home.

I was buried in the rubble of the same house, and rescued later that night by two gentlemen, Prenel and Bòs Jhon, both of whom, like Melise, had worked for my landlady. Prenel hailed from the same community in the Grand’Anse as Melise. Because it is by sheer luck that I am here while Melise is not, and because I owe my life to someone from there, I am beholden to Melise’s community, and that is why I watched, with a sickening sense of powerlessness, as Hurricane Matthew gathered strength and bore down on southwestern Haiti.

Andeyò

In Haiti, they call migrants from the countryside—such as Melise—*moun andeyò*. To be *andeyò*, from the French *en dehors*, is literally to be outside. The *peyi andeyò* is the outside country, the land beyond the city (*lavil*), specifically beyond Port-au-Prince. To be a *moun andeyò* is to be a person

from the outside land. An outsider. But *andeyò* is not merely a geographical designation. It also means political, social, and economic exclusion.

On 5 October, one day after the storm, Haitian artist and cartoonist Ralph Penel Pierre created a poignant image of a broken Haiti, the southern peninsula disconnected from the rest of the country. The southern peninsula is an arm reaching out in desperation, while four hands extend from the rest of Haiti, desiring but unable to help. Hurricane Matthew laid bare the tenuous infrastructure that had held Haiti together, if just barely. With the bridge washed away and cell phone towers down, southern Haiti was cut off. For days, people in Port-au-Prince remained in a holding pattern, awaiting news from their loved ones—just as their families in the Grand’Anse had done years before, after the quake.

At first, there was so little news about conditions in the southern peninsula. I searched social media for any information I could find, sifting through some fake news and many white saviors, some of whom were already bandying about one of the words I hate the most: *resilience*. Lauding the Haitian people for their so-called resilience implies that Black bodies, minds, and souls can take more suffering and brutality than other people can.

A US missionary posted photos on Facebook that showed women with their breasts exposed and an adolescent boy wearing no pants. In one image, several people run toward the camera, including a child in motion, one foot on the ground. Someone has commented, “The smiling amputee reminds me of the earthquake. They have been through so much and still they rejoice in any gesture.”

Under that, another person has replied, “I think his leg is behind him. I don’t think he’s an amputee.”

After the storm hit, CNN reported: “Haiti had only just begun rebuilding from a devastating earthquake six years ago when Hurricane Matthew tore through the small Caribbean nation.”¹

But the far south of Haiti—the area struck hardest by Hurricane Matthew—was not physically hit by the earthquake, while Port-au-Prince, in turn, was affected only minimally by the hurricane. The earthquake was mostly an urban disaster, while the hurricane swept away small homes and *lakou* (family compounds), livestock, and crops. Yet to most international news outlets, Haiti might as well not have regions.

This is the standard media narrative: Haiti, and Haitian people, non-specific and undifferentiated, are inherently doomed. There were fundamental, specific differences between the 2010 earthquake and Hurricane Matthew. At the same time, the two catastrophes are connected through historical and social patterns of displacement and exclusion. The earthquake was a disaster because it hit Port-au-Prince, the capital of an

overcentralized country, filled with people from the countryside seeking a better life, forced by poverty and circumstance to live in precarious housing. Hurricane Matthew was a disaster because it hit areas far from Port-au-Prince: far from the capital, far from the aid apparatus and infrastructure, for Haiti is at once “the republic of NGOs,” where nongovernmental organizations have taken over the role of the state, and “the republic of Port-au-Prince,” where almost all governance and services are concentrated in the capital. In other words, the earthquake and the hurricane both came down to centralization and exclusion.

There are valences of *andeyò*. There are outsiders, and then there are *outsiders*. Migrants to Port-au-Prince refer to their home communities as simply *pwovens* (the countryside) or *andeyò*, as though the only thing you need to know about the places from which they hail is that they are not the capital. They speak of home in metonyms: anyone from Grand’Anse becomes *moun Jeremi*, people from the main regional city of Jérémie, and, if asked for more specificity, people like Claudine’s family, who come from the communal sections, refer to themselves in terms of the nearest town. (In their case, the town is Abricots.) Most people have never heard of their true homes anyway.

These concentric valences of outsidersness are also valences of political and social exclusion, valences of vulnerability. Outsidersness and vulnerability are inextricable, and they underlie most ordinary injustices and ordinary preventable deaths: the citizen who must walk two hours to vote for candidates that will not represent their interests, the mother who dies in labor because she cannot get to the clinic in the nearest town in time, the child who dies of a burst appendix, or any ordinary infection that goes to sepsis.

Hurricane Matthew’s devastation, and the response to it, corresponded to these layers of exclusion. People in cities or towns are more likely to have cement roofs that can withstand hurricane-force winds. People in cities or towns were more able to access posthurricane aid—whether food or tarps—than people living in the distant communal sections. To be *andeyò* is to be beyond any safety net; it is to exist in a chronic state of precarity.

There was no celebrity telethon after Hurricane Matthew, no “We Are the World,” no grand (if ultimately empty) gestures of international solidarity, as there had been after the earthquake. Why not? Because no one saw the earthquake coming. Because high death counts at the direct moment of impact matter more than indirect deaths from hunger, disease, or poverty in the long aftermath. The earthquake hit a capital city, where a handful of foreign journalists already lived, which allowed international media coverage to begin immediately and surge once the parachuters hit

the tarmac. Because the earthquake leveled schools, government ministries, hotels, and the UN headquarters, killing rich and poor alike, and foreigners too.

Hurricane Matthew was the sort of disaster outsiders expect in Haiti. Its effects were harder to immediately discern, because the most affected areas were hard to reach, and even if you did, maybe the devastation didn't look like much, unless you knew what the Grand'Anse looked like before the storm. You wouldn't know that the Grand'Anse was one of the most fertile parts of the country. After all, Haiti is notoriously denuded, eroded, and poor.

Return

In December 2016, two and a half months after the storm, I went home with Claudine and her cousin Bazelet. As we traveled from Port-au-Prince along the southern peninsula on a crowded bus, the landscape changed. Palm trees stood lopsided, their fronds gone from the direction the wind had blown. As we headed west, they were bald, like great Q-tips.

Even further west, they were ripped out, flat on the ground. The Grand'Anse was unrecognizable. Houses that didn't used to be visible through the trees now stood out from miles away. Sometimes they weren't really houses at all, but improvised constructions of tarp, sheet metal, and straw mats. It looked like Port-au-Prince in 2010, a sea of blue and grey tarps, each branded with the name of the agency that provided them, as if to continually remind the grateful recipient of their good fortune.

Before the storm, everyone used to relax in the shade of the enormous mango tree in Claudine's family's lakou, where the air felt fresh, even on the hottest days—sitting on the exposed roots, as high as benches, or leaning a chair against the trunk, or stretching out on a sisal mat. Hurricane Matthew stripped the tree bare, and there was nowhere to hide from the midday sun. When St. Neret wasn't in his fields, trying to plant and recover what he could, when Olène wasn't cooking over the fire in the makeshift outdoor kitchen they'd built after Matthew washed away their old one, they took refuge inside the small house. The roof had been swept away but they'd covered the house with tarps, rocks, and pieces of wood. It was the only place that offered some relief from the sun.

But in the evenings, when the sun went down and the air grew cooler, we would gather in the lakou to eat, and things felt almost like they did before Matthew. The trees had been uprooted and destroyed, too, so there was no tonmtom, pounded breadfruit eaten with okra sauce, for those

first few months. We ate food aid, or *manje sinistre*: US-grown white rice, giant USAID cans of cooking oil, and lentils. When the sea wasn't rough, people could go fishing, so at least there was fresh fish and *brigo*, sea snails. Because limes were expensive and scarce, Claudine's stepmother, Olène, used a green plant with little pods to give food a sour, acidic taste. "Do you know this plant?" she asked me. I shook my head. "It's called *bleng bleng*. It's what we used a long time ago. It's what we use now when we don't have limes or vinegar."

We'd sit in the *lakou* and chat, and tell stories and jokes. Claudine would text with her boyfriend back in Port-au-Prince, scour the cooking pots, and throw scraps of fish to their three dogs, and sometimes to Claudine's grandfather's dog too, a handsome black-and-brown fellow with eye-brows and a white-tipped tail, which he holds proudly erect as he marches around the *lakou*. His name is Ipokrit, "Hypocrite."

Patterns of everyday life, like the landscape itself, were turned on their heads. *Tonmtonm*, long a staple, had become a rarity, a special occasion food. In the months after the storm, breadfruit could only be bought in Port-au-Prince at a steep price and brought back to Jérémie. "Breadfruit is what maintained the people of Grand'Anse," Melise's cousin Samuel explained to me. "Now we don't know in what year we'll ever see breadfruit again."

"The hurricane destroyed everything we had," Samuel continued. "Now we are living like animals, in the open air, in the rain. All of our livestock—goats, cows, horses, mules, pigs, chickens—they all died." If people manage to buy seeds, plants, or livestock to replace what they lost in the hurricane, the treeless landscape leaves them little shade to plant those seeds or tie up their livestock. "It's too much sun," Samuel said, "they all burn up."

He went on. "I don't know how to read. I can't go sit in an office. This is my work." He showed me his well-used machete, caked with red earth. He held it in his callused hands and said, "I am a farmer. That is how I live. And it's all lost. . . . All the yams are lost. Only the plantain trees have started to grow again. After the hurricane, I tried to plant beans, but the sun was too much and they were all lost, too. Even the bananas, if they get too much sun, will die. They'll all die."

Before Matthew struck, there had been a bumper crop. "This year, it was as though the breadfruit would never end," Olène recalled wistfully, sitting on a straw mat on her porch as night fell. The sky was wider, with the tree cover gone. With no ambient light beyond the faint glow of a flashlight, it sparkled with stars. She took a discreet pinch of powdered tobacco and sniffed, then blew her nose. "Breadfruit, coconuts. Everyone ate so well."

The coconut trees that allowed Claudine’s father to provide for his family and send his children to school were destroyed. The chickens and goats all perished and were scavenged by dogs. If it weren’t for *manje sinistre* and remittances from abroad, people would have starved. Friends from remote areas of the Grand’Anse report that their families never received any *manje sinistre* at all. Even for those who receive them, the distribution of aid vouchers is rarely equitable; in many cases, the vouchers distributed by the municipal government fall into the hands of powerful people, who give them to their supporters, families, and friends. But even when everyone knows that the game is rigged, even when everyone knows that food aid undercuts domestic production, even when people suspect that the NGOs are out for profit, no one can extricate themselves from the aid economy.

“For those of us of a certain age—me, I was born in 1970—we lost everything we are used to, everything we lived off of,” Samuel said matter-of-factly. “I might die and never see them again. Maybe my children, down the road, will be alive when the trees sprout again.”

“Mwatye sa a mezire pou tout moun”

“Matthew” is not a familiar name to most people in that part of rural Haiti. In Claudine’s hometown, they turned the word into something more common: *Mwatye*.

A *mwatye* is a small old-fashioned glass Coca-Cola bottle, which people use to measure out cooking oil or *kleren* (high-proof sugarcane liquor) in the public markets. They called the hurricane *Mwatye*, and people joked, “*Mwatye sa a mezire pou tout moun. Tout moun jwenn*” (That *mwatye* contained enough for everybody. Everybody got some). The joke had a stinging core of social commentary: *Mwatye* was an equalizing force that destroyed everything in sight.

Bazelet took me to meet one of their neighbors, a fisherman named Michel and his wife Marie. Michel cradled his infant son on his lap, and described how he lost his dugout canoe—his livelihood—in the storm. “I would rather have lost my house than my *kanòt*,” he sighed. He lost both.

“We thought we wouldn’t live,” Michel continued. “We had no hope that we would survive. It started around eight in the evening, and it got stronger and stronger all night. By five in the morning, it was pounding us over and over, it was destroying all the houses. And we thought we wouldn’t survive. We knew a hurricane was coming, but we never imagined it would be that strong.”

“I always say it was God. Why? You see where that mango tree is? It was uprooted, but it didn’t fall on the house. You see that breadfruit tree?” he gestured. “It was uprooted, but it didn’t fall on the house. If that wasn’t God’s power at work, then what was it?”

What house? I thought to myself, but didn’t say anything. Throughout the community, I’d seen how the hurricane had ripped away sheet-metal roofs, leaving the wooden frames behind, but in Michel’s case, the walls crumbled completely, leaving the low metal roof behind on the ground. They made a hole to serve as a door and stretched a USAID tarp over the top, and that is where their family lived.

“I’ve got a buddy,” Michel continued. “That night, when the wind really started to blow, and he heard the trees cracking, they were falling on the roof—boom!—he said, ‘Mezanmi, what’s going on?’ And he opened the door, he looked outside, and he saw a fire coming down on him, and—bang!—he shut the door. He said he didn’t know if anyone else saw it, but there really was a fire in there. That’s why so many of the trees burned. They say there really was fire in it. I saw other trees that were all blackened, every one of them. There was a fire in the storm, there was a product in it that devoured things. They say it’s something the *blan* sent, or else it was God.” In Haiti, *blan* means foreigners of any color.

“Blan sent the hurricane?” I asked.

“Well, that’s what some people say. They say *blan* can do that, but then other people say it can’t have been the *blan*, because why would they send the hurricane and then rush in to bring us food?”

Bazelet laughed. “Well, that’s good logic! If the *blan* really wanted to kill us, I don’t think they’d rush with food for us to eat!”

Michel nodded. “That’s what I always tell people. If the *blan* had done this, if they had sent this hurricane to kill us, they wouldn’t then get on airplanes to bring us food. I always say: *blan* wouldn’t hate me so much that they’d send this hurricane.”

He does not argue that *blan* couldn’t intentionally create a hurricane that could rip through the entire Caribbean. He asks instead why would they *bother* to do that, only to come help afterward. *Blan* have the power to destroy or to save.

“If it weren’t for the *blan*, we would all have gone mad, we all would have died,” interjected Michel’s wife, Marie. “Our only hope lies with the *blan*.”

“Aprè Bondye se *blan*,” Michel declared, his baby son babbling on his knees, as we looked out over the sea where he used to fish, and the wind whipped over the hillside where his house used to be. “Foreigners are next to God.”

Rebuilding

We can't talk about the Haiti earthquake without talking about poverty, we can't talk about poverty without talking about power, and we can't talk about power without talking about slavery, imperialism, and colonization. If you ask why the hurricane or the earthquake were disasters, I'd start with Columbus. All the seemingly disparate "bad things" that have "happened" to Haiti in the past ten years—the earthquake, hurricanes, epidemics, political upheaval—are connected and cumulative, and they all come down to power. The exceptional moment of crisis is inseparable from ordinary vulnerability.

Disasters lay bare the vulnerabilities in a society. Disasters make places more susceptible to other disasters, like a house with a cracked and crumbling foundation. What does recovery mean when the disaster never ends? When an earthquake kills a breadwinner and the family can no longer afford hospital fees, when a hurricane washes away a year's worth of crops or fills a basement with toxic black mold, when the power stays off for weeks and insulin goes bad, how do you count the dead? Disasters are caused by poverty and they worsen poverty, and poverty kills people every day. Ordinary deaths by malaria, by hypertension, in childbirth—after the rest of the world has moved on from the initial crisis. Disasters are always political. But so, too, are ordinary deaths.

Disasters can also reveal the decency that lies within individuals and in societies. Ordinary acts of solidarity and reciprocity are transformed, by the precarity of life, into political acts of survival. I witnessed that decency in the wake of the earthquake. I owe my life to it.

But that grassroots solidarity begins to fray when states and other institutions intervene. On the night of 12 January 2010, the rupture was so unmendable, the devastation so complete, I thought it certain that things would change. Looking back, that sense of certainty appears foolish. It now seems inevitable that the aid response itself would be a disaster, and that Haiti would continue to be destroyed, from within and from beyond, by the same forces that have been devouring it for centuries.

After Hurricane Matthew, just as after the earthquake, people came together to save what could be saved.

My own survival was not a question of luck. The two men who saved my life, both of them migrants from the countryside, had been prepared by a lifetime of having to ensure their own survival. Beyond the reach of the centralized state, beyond the scope of the centralized NGO apparatus, outside of what most outsider observers would term "civil society," it was those very strategies of survival, collaboration, mutual aid, and reci-

procuity—the traditions of *konbit* (cooperative communal labor) and other forms of grassroots organization—that allowed people to survive the storm, and, however haltingly, to begin to recover.

Days before we had news of our friends living on the southern peninsula, my friend and colleague Vincent Joos and I launched a GoFundMe campaign. It was the ordinary thing to do. Countless Haitian people in the diaspora and in Port-au-Prince likewise raised money and collected goods, seeds, plants, and livestock for people in the south. Everyone knew that institutional humanitarian aid, whatever form it took, would be unequal to the scale of the disaster. We were astonished to raise more than \$20,000 through word of mouth on social media. If Vincent and I were particularly successful, it was because we had established reputations as (foreign) scholars who had published about Haiti: credibility through whiteness, credibility through Googleability. We split the money. Vincent sent his portion to friends in Chambellan and I sent mine to Claudine. Within a week of the hurricane, Claudine and Bazelet brought food from Port-au-Prince, days before any other food aid reached that area.

On later trips they brought sand, sheet metal, rebar, and other building materials, and Bazelet, who was studying civil engineering, helped his family build stronger, more hurricane-proof homes.

The humanitarian question is not whether intervening is good or bad. Intervening is not a choice, neither for foreigners who have developed relationships in Haiti, nor for Haitian people who have left to seek a better life abroad. We know that individual acts of charity or patronage are no substitute for governance, but they are also an obligation. We act because we must, even though we know that such interventions do not fix the underlying problem and are no substitute for justice. There will be more crises, more emergencies, more losses. Having the right connections can temporarily transcend the pervasive forces of structural violence, sometimes. We do not need to wonder what happens every day to people who do not have powerful contacts and advocates.

In January 2017, I watched as the men and boys formed a *konbit* each day to haul heavy coral rocks up from the ocean's edge, to create the foundations of the new houses they were building. Even the six-year-old nicknamed Baby Jhon participated, carrying a rock balanced on a *twokèt* on his head, holding it with both hands. When they grew tired, the men would sit in Claudine's family's *lakou* and pass around a bottle of *kleren*.

"Don't give any to Baby Jhon!" Claudine admonished.

"E pa gason li ye? Isn't he a man too? He participated in the *corvée*," Samuel replied. Then, chastened, he added, "We'll just give him a capful."

They passed me the bottle too, though I protested that I had carried no rocks, and Samuel wiped his brow. He told me, “Lolo, we suffered so much in the storm, that storm Mwatye. Many people thought they wouldn’t survive, because after the storm, they didn’t know where to go. There was nothing left. There was nothing left. But Laura, let me explain something to you.”

“You see, when Claudine came, she brought food for us. . . . The food you sent for us was the first food that saved us. And that’s what gave me *libète m, egalite m, fratènite m* [my liberty, my equality, my brotherhood]. Without Claudine, I would never have gotten that food, because she divided the food up among all of us. That food saved me. And I salute Claudine’s aunt who died too, Melise. I say to Melise: thank you. Claudine has taken Melise’s place. I salute Melise, in death.”

Melise’s family still feels Melise’s absence, but more than that, they feel her presence, the abiding effects of her life. She is still there. She is still taking care of her siblings and her village, as she did in life, when she sent a portion of her wages home each month. The relationships she made and nurtured, within her own family and beyond it, last beyond her death. I thought of the earthquake and the storm—two disasters seven years apart; two regions, one *lavil* and the other *andeyò*. I thought of everything that binds us together. I thought about the crisis that never seems to end. Melise, too, lingers. Her life, too, never ends.

Postscript: God Loves the Grand’Anse

Fifteen months after the storm, when I visited again, I was astonished to see how the Grand’Anse recovered. A year earlier, it had looked like a desert. By 2018, it was green, filled with banana trees. In a country that so many observers easily label eroded, deforested, and barren, the land revealed itself to be alive.

The rebirth was miraculous because of the fragility and precariousness that lie hidden beneath the bounty. To be *andeyò* is to be subject to the winds of fate.

People harvested plantains, yams, manioc, even some breadfruit. Coconuts, cacao, and coffee—cash crops—will take longer to regenerate. But there were unforeseen gifts, which appear as miracles: papaya trees, laden with heavy fruit, grow where there were no papaya trees before. *Maskreti*—castor oil beans, used to make profitable oil—grow where there were no *maskreti* before.

They say the hurricane winds brought the papaya and the maskreti. They say, “This is nature’s response to manje sinistre.” They say, “God loves the Grand’Anse.”

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Note

1. Park, Madison, Angela Dewan, and Chandrika Narayan. “Haiti: Hurricane Matthew Leaves Hundreds Dead.” CNN, October 7, 2016. <https://www.cnn.com/2016/10/07/americas/haiti-hurricane-matthew>.